



Statement from the Board of Directors of Banana Kelly Community Improvement Association, Inc. regarding the Bronx Social Center

Several years ago, Lisa Ortega requested that her group, Bronx Social Center, be provided with space at 970 Prospect Avenue, one of Banana Kelly's buildings. We provided Bronx Social Center with space. There were no written agreements, just a verbal understanding that the space would be used for meetings and passive activities.

The space may have been used for these types of activities, but as we later learned, the space was also used for late night parties and for use by other groups without our permission or knowledge (we have no idea if any fees were charged). This put our organization at risk for potential liability.

Several meetings were held with the group to try to work out differences, but the situation grew worse. In fact, Bronx Social Center and other groups started using adjoining space without our knowledge or permission, and left these spaces opened after use, which resulted in some office equipment being stolen, garbage being left after the gatherings to be cleaned up by our staff and more. When our building superintendent brought this to the attention of Bronx Social Center staff, the answer he received was that it was not them, but the "other people." This is when we learned about the use of space by other groups.

In the meantime, likely prompted by complaining tenants calling 311, the Department of Buildings inspected the space and gave us a violation, which require us to shut down the space. At that time we offered to help Bronx Social Center find an architect to do the work necessary to correct the violation. This, however, became a moot point when our relationship deteriorated.

Below are some specific responses to their charges:

'The Bronx Social Center opposed the city's plan to rezone (AKA gentrify) Southern Boulevard. We pissed off local politicians like Councilman Rafael Salamanca and Democratic party boss Marcos Crespo.

We are certain this is true. Banana Kelly has also upset the local Councilmember and other elected officials on several occasions.

'They threatened to pull favors and \$90,000 in funding from Banana Kelly--

the nonprofit landlord housing the Center--unless their critics were silenced'.

We cannot respond to the “pull favors” charge since we do not know what that is referring to. However, what we can attest to is that Banana Kelly was threatened with the loss of funding after several of our organizers were at a zoning rally holding up signs referring to Councilmember Salamanca as a “pimp” and Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Vivirito as a “gusano,” by which we assume was meant to be translated as “maggot.” However, the particular funding referred to (\$90,000) was not funding that any Councilmember controlled and could not be “pulled” from us. This was made clear to our board by the former CEO of Urban Justice Center, current Assemblyman, Harvey Epstein.

‘Banana Kelly chose to play enforcer for the politicians, first purging their staff of rezoning critics, and then evicting us’.

This is simply not true. The Board of Banana Kelly viewed this situation regarding the demonstration as problematic, but also as a learning experience. Unlike Bronx Social Center, Banana Kelly is a resident-led mutual housing association that has an advocacy agenda but also has a responsibility to thousands of low income residents whose rents are kept affordable (about 45% of the Bronx median) through the kind of preservation work that we do and services we provide. As a mutual housing association, our residents not only have a role in policy (through our Resident Council) but also a role in governance. A plurality of board seats are reserved for resident leaders, all of whom struggle with the high cost of housing and some of whom were formerly homeless. At the time of the board meeting when the supposed “purge” was to have taken place, resident leaders comprised a majority of our board.

Contrary to the charge made by Bronx Social Center, the board demanded changes in our organizing department based upon their determination that our organizing staff took advocacy positions and led campaigns that did not include Resident Council leaders. In fact, if this were a purge of staff orchestrated by “rezoning critics” then we would have let go of one of the staff members who personally was vehemently opposed to rezoning and who was the staff member holding up the “gusano” sign at the aforementioned demonstration. He was not fired and the organization tried to work with him as we worked to rebuild the department.

‘We'll share more info about this in the coming days’.

‘This eviction is an attack on everyone who used the Center to make art against gentrification, raise funds for Puerto Rico, and support incarcerated families. But they can't stop us. We will continue to oppose the fake solutions peddled by politicians and their crony nonprofits’.

As mentioned above, the permission to use the space provided to Bronx Social Center was not inclusive of them inviting whatever group(s) they deemed appropriate to use the space in whatever way they decided was appropriate. Our board was upset and rightly so when they learned about the “everyone” who was using the space without our knowledge or approval. This not only posed a huge liability to Banana Kelly but this abuse, based apparently upon some sense of entitlement, was compounded by irresponsible use of the space and parties that our building superintendent had to clean up after, including having to clean up garbage that (according to him) included drug paraphernalia, a situation indicative of space utilization that is not self-monitored or regulated in a responsible manner. Continuation of this behavior would put the residents, many of them families, at 970 Prospect Ave. at risk.

The bottom line is that Banana Kelly severed relations with the Bronx Social Center due to its belligerent approach to our relationship, abuse of the space that was provided free of charge, and due to fact that its staff allowed other groups to utilize the space without our knowledge or approval.